Kenneth Lincoln: On Sherman Alexie

With Sherman Alexie, readers can throw formal questions out the smokehole (as in resistance to other modern verse innovators, Whitman, Williams, Sexton, or the Beats). Parodic antiformalism may account for some of Alexie's mass maverick appeal. This Indian gadfly jumps through all the hoops, sonnet, to villanelle, to heroic couplet, all tongue-in-cheeky. "I'm sorry, but I've met thousands of Indians," he told Indian Artist magazine, Spring 1998, "and I have yet to know of anyone who has stood on a mountain waiting for a sign." A reader enters the land of MTV and renascent AIM: a cartoon Pocahontas meets Beavis and Butt-head at the forest's edge, Sitting Bull takes on Arnold Schwarzenegger at Wounded Knee '73. The Last Real Indian has a few last words.

A stand-up comedian, the Indian improvisator is the performing text, obviating too close a textual reading: youngish man, six-foot-two or so, born in 1966 at the height of hippie nativism, from Wellpinit, Washington, now living in Seattle and taking the fin de siecle literary world by storm (an Indian Oscar Wilde?). After a century of benign neglect, Indian literature has hit an inflationary spiral with six-figure book deals and million-dollar movies. New York publishers have been humping this sassy, talk-back satirist as the last essentialist hold-out, a commercially successful Crazy Horse of mass marketing. The "most prodigious" Native American writer to date, Alexie told a Chicago Sun reporter asking about his brassy novel, Indian Killer, October 1996, to which the reporter queried, "Indian dujour?" Our young hero replied, "If so, it's been a very long day. How about Indian du decade?" Millennial Indian extraordinaire? The reporter raised the controversy over Granta naming Alexie one of the twenty "Best Young American Novelists" for Reservation Blues (not a novel), and Sherman snapped: "To say I was on the list because I'm an Indian is ridiculous: I'm one of the most critically respected writers in the country. So the Granta critics . . . essentially, fuck 'em" (October 31, 1996, New City's Literary Supplement). Starting with Native American writers, Alexie's competition includes no less than Allen, Erdrich, Harjo, Hogan, Momaday, Ortiz, Silko, TallMountain, Tapahonso, Welch, and Whiteman, among others (not to mention non-Indians like Toni Morrison, Norman Mailer, Cormac McCarthy, or Rita Dove). If "most critically respected" in a specific fictional genre of Indian Killer (thriller violence with racial undertones), his closest rivals are Tony Hillerman, Gerald Vizenor, Mickey Spillane, and Stephen King, an acknowledged model, John Steinbeck and the Brady Bunch tossed in. "He's young," says my elder brother back home, "he'll ripen, given time."

A breed Spokane and Coeur d'Alene, not just anybody, but thirteen-sixteenths blood, according to his poetry: "I write about the kind of Indian I am: kind of mixed up, kind of odd, not traditional. I'm a rez kid who's gone urban" (Indian Artist). What kind of an Indian is this??a photogenic black mane of hair, dark-framed bifocal glasses, high-school class president, bookworm nose broken six times by bullies (he reminisces), English lit college degree from Eastern Washington State (after passing out as a pre-med student in his anatomy class, twice). His work is wizened with poetic anger, ribald love, and whipsaw humor. The crazy-heart bear is dancing comically, riding a wobbly unicycle, tossing overripe tomatoes at his audience. "This late in the 2Oth century," the poet says in Red Blues, "we still make the unknown ours by destroying it." His firecat imagination plays tricks on the reader, for our supposed good, for its own native delight and survival. "You almost / believe every Indian is
The boy mimed everyone in his family and still won't Stop talking. "I was a divisive presence on the reservation when I was seven," he told an LA Times reporter, December 17, 1996. "I was a weird, eccentric, very arrogant little boy. The writing doesn't change anybody's opinion of me." Promoting his new movie, Smoke Signals (coproduced with Cheyenne-Arapaho director Chris Eyre), the writer describes himself today as "mouthy, opinionated and arrogant," a court jester's cross of Caliban, Groucho Marx, and Lear's Fool, but underneath, "I'm a sweetheart" (Denver Post, October 20, 1997). He's the best native example yet of Lewis Hyde's wiley hinge-maker, Trickster, the infant Prince of Thieves, Hermes stealing into Olympus to claim legitimacy: "Wandering aimlessly, stupider than the animals, he is at once the bungling host and the agile parasite; he has no way of his own but he is the Great Imitator who adopts the many ways of those around him. Unconstrained by instinct, he is the author of endlessly creative and novel deceptions, from hidden hooks to tracks that are impossible to read."

Artistic grist and ironic survival are inseparable in this verse, tracing a short lifetime of basketball (a team captain "ball hog" in high school), beer, TV, rez cars falling apart, pony dreams, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) babies, and fancy-dancing drunks. "You call it genocide; I call it economics," Custer snorts. A warm-up for fiction and the movies, poetics are wrapped up in the politics of native poverty, torqued metrics, and ethnic protest: dime store Indi'n princesses and back-alley vision questers, 7-11 heroes and Vietnam vets, Marlon Brando and Crazy Horse. No insurance CEO or village doctor, Alexie has the near fatal, comic bravado of surviving an everyday rez, where every day is a blow to the stomach and a blaze of understanding. Being Indian means you're hanging on for dear life, hanging in there with catastrophic humor, kicking back at sunset, staggering through the '49 to dawn, laughing your ass off and on again (the short fiction says), and accepting that bottom line of your neighbor's butt next to you, misplaced, displaced, re-relocated into the present Red reality, so real that it hurts. So unreal in its hurtful beauty, so surreal that it makes you blink and smile to see another dawn. "How do you explain the survival of all of us who were never meant to survive?" It's a long walk from Sitting Bull bearing "hard times" to Charlie Blackbird "surviving." Alexie takes to Internet chat rooms for essential defenses of native sovereignty and intercultural access to America's power structures, particularly publishing and the movies.

So, from Momaday's visionary form, through Welch's shamanic rhythm, here's a surreal trickster savage in two-dimensional poetic cartoon. Rather than close reading or parsing the lines, his work elicits charged reaction, critical gut response, positive or negative argument. Reading Alexie's work triggers a recoil from the shock of Indian reality, like looking into the Sun Dance sun, going blind, and slowly regaining sight, stars and blackspots and sunbursts floating across the field of perception, so you know it's your perception, anyway, at last, of reality: "whiskey salmon absence," the poem "Citizen Kane" ends. Firewater, relocation, vanishing American. The images, concretely charged as Pound's Vorticist objects, are loaded in disconnections: the poison where food swarms, desperate homing, the absence that starves Indians to death. "Rosebud" is not a child's movie sled but a desperately poor Sioux
reservation in the Dakotas.

"But, I mean, I really love movies. I always have," Alexie said in "Making Smoke" (Aboriginal Voices May-June 1998). "I love movies more than I love books, and believe me, I love books more than I love every human being, except the dozen or so people in my life who love movies and books just as much as I do." His favorite films are Midnight Cowboy, The Graduate, and Aliens. The writer goes on, "I mean, screenplays are more like poetry than like fiction. Screenplays rely on imagery to carry the narrative, rather than the other way around. And screenplays have form. Like sonnets, actually. Just as there's [sic] expectations of form, meter, and rhyme in a sonnet, there are the same kinds of expectations for screenplays."

There are two dimensions in Alexie's work, screenplay to verse, often no more than two characters in the short fiction, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. His work is mostly minimalist drama, back to the first Greek plays, alazon to eiron, dreamer to realist, fool to cynic. Toss in commedia dell'arte, Punch and Judy, Laurel and Hardy, Amos and Andy, Lewis and Martin, Red Ryder and Little Beaver. The embedded third dimension of this post-holocaustal comedy is cultural landscape, for lack of a better term, devastated native homestead. So a third character might be salvage-surrealist, Old Man absent and implied, as with Welch's winter-in-the-blood Na'pi. The third- dimensional axis then is Indi'n humor, a vanishing point of survival in the canvas of a hidden spirit world, including Trickster mimics, all around and behind us. Alexie takes Welch's foxy shaman a skitter-step forward to tease Mary Austin: "Sweetheart, history / doesn't always look like horses."

Poetry comes on not so much a text as a comic ruse, a razored one-liner, a reader's riff to wake up America. The world is Indian as a coyote magician who makes every ordinary day a trick of survival, a vanishing act, a raw joke. A reader's breath catches in the throat and comes out Laughing strange, still ... a breath it is, of life. It gets you going, brothers' and sisters, a buzzing, rattling, weeping, yipping imagination. Cry so hard you begin to laugh: run so fast you lap your shadow: dream so hard you can't sleep: think so hard you startle awake like a child. "Maia gave birth to a wily boy," the Homeric hymn begins, "flattering and cunning, a robber and cattle thief, a bringer of dreams, awake all night, waiting by the gates of the city?Hermes, who was soon to earn himself quite a reputation among the gods, who do not die." Crossing Ginsberg with Creeley, Hughes's Crow with Berryman's Mistah Bones, Alexie brews a homeboy devil's own humor. The voice makes junkyard poetry out of broke-down reality, vision out of delirium tremens, prayer out of laughter. "When my father first smiled," the poet recalls, "it scared the shit out of me." ...

Indi'n vaudeville, then, stand-up comedy on the edge of despair; A late-twentieth-century, quasi-visionary clown tells the truth that hurts and heals in one-liners cheesy as the Marx Brothers, trenchant as Lenny Bruce, tricky as Charlie Hill's BIA Halloween "Trick or Treaty." The, stand-up poet marvels in dismay, "Imagine Coyote accepts / the Oscar for lifetime achievement." There's an old trickster-teacher role here in a young Indian's hands-jokes draw the line, cut to the quick, sling the bull, open the talk. "White Men Can't Drum," Alexie announced in Esquire Magazine, October 1992, roasting the new-age men's movement, all the Wannabe fuss and fustian.

"How do you explain the survival of all of us who were never meant to survive?" asks the verse straight man.

"There is nothing we cannot survive," the poet swears. Surviving war is the premise. In The Summer of Black Widows (1996), Alexie's sixth poetry collection in as many years (composing by computer), "Father and Farther" (also performed on the rock cassette, Reservation Blues)
recalls a drunken basketball coach and a losing team. "Listen," his father slurs, "I was a paratrooper in the war."

"Which war?" the boy-poet asks.

"All of them," he said. Quincentennial facts: Native Americans as a composite are the only in-country ethnic group that the U.S. has declared war against, 1860-1890. Some existing 560 reservations, 315 in the lower forty-eight states, are natively seen from inside as occupied POW camps. Think of it as the delayed stress of contemporary Indian America: the post-traumatic shock of surviving Columbus to Cotton Mather, Buffalo Bill Cody to Andy Jackson, Chivington to Custer. "Goddamn," the general says, again and again, "saber is a beautiful word," in ironic cut against Auden's penchant for "scissors." World War I Indian volunteers, as cited, gained Native Americans dual citizenship in 1924. Code Talkers in World War II made natives national heroes. Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm's chemical poisoning brought tribal veterans into millennial terror.

In 1993, the U.C.I.A American Indian Studies Center published Old Shins & New Skins as no. 9 in the Native American Poetry Series. Old shirts, not stuffed new suits: new 'skins, Redskins reborn, sloughing "old" skins. There are always two sides to things, bicultural ironies to new-age lies, & the "blessed ampersand," hip shorthand to a coded new tongue, the with-it Indi'n poet. There's no text "set" here as such, but more a radical riff, something spilled over, a virus, a toxin released, a metastasizing anger. It's a "reservation of my mind," the poet says. The opening epithet equates, "Anger x Imagination = poetry," in the amplitude & invention of the angry young Indian. One shot short of death, Seymour says, drink as you write free verse, no matter if "our failures are spectacular." Maverick Trixter talks back, makes a different kind of poetry for people with differences: "it was not written for the white literary establishment," Adrian Louis says in the foreword to Old Skins & New Shins.

A double buckskin language frays the edges of bicultural America, questions the multiple meanings of reservation, red, risk, Cody & Crazy Horse, Marlon Brando & John Wayne, Christ & Custer, who died for your sins. The critic is left with notes to bumper-sticker poetics, insult & antagonism, the fractious come-hither. Poetry as disruptive tease, a sideshow of historical truth & poetic hyperbole. Or, to borrow from the social sciences, "privileged license": tribal teasing tests boundaries, deepens resilience, insures survival, bets on renewal. Not without the warrior history of Old English insults, flyerings, hurled across a river a thousand years ago in "The Battle of Maldon." LA South Central Blacks doin' the dozens, Yer granmother wears combat boots! The Last Poets in Harlem chant, Niggers like to fuck each other . . . . El Paso Hispanics drive slow 'n low riders. Inventories of abuses, imagined & otherwise: hunger of imagination, poverty of memory, toxicity of history, all in the face of cultural genocide and racial misrepresentation and out-right extermination, to challenge musty stereotypes of vanishing, savage, stoic, silent, shamanic, stuporous Indians. Poetry is never bread enough & doesn't pay the bills, "damned from beginning to end," Williams says. Who could quibble aesthetics in this setting?

money is free if you 're poor enough

Are there any connections with canonical American poetry? Start with Langston Hughes's essentialist pride in the Harlem Renaissance, "I, too, sing America," not just Walt Whitman fingering leaves of grass, or Carl Sandburg shouldering Chicago. Allen Ginsberg howled his native place in the 1950s: the marginalized, dispossessed, discriminated, hipster, homosexual, Jewish, offbeat antihero. It's an old revolutionary American motif, the lost found,
the last first, the underdog bites back. Sylvia Plath’s rage and exhibitionist daring to die for us as Lady Lazarus: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." Ted Roethke’s lost-son, lyric blues: "Thrum-thrum, who can be equal to ease? / I’ve seen my father’s face before / Deep in the belly of a thing to be." John Berryman’s brilliant mad comic pain: "These songs were not meant to be understood, you understand, / They were meant to terrify & comfort. / Lilac was found in his hand."

A kind of Indian antipoetry breaks form at the millennial end. Alexie pushes against formalist assumptions of what poetry ought to be, knocks down aesthetic barriers set up in xenophobic academic corridors, and rebounds as cultural performance. He can play technique with mock sonnet, breezy villanelle, unheroic couplet, tinkling tercet, quaky quatrain in any-beat lines. The rhymer trades on surreal images and throwaway metaphors in a drunken villanelle: Trail of Tears . . . trail of beers. The rush of his poems is an energy released, stampeding horses, raging fires, stomping shoes: the poet as fast & loose sharpster in accretive repetition. Alexie likes catalogues, anaphoral first-word repetitions, the accumulative power of oral traditions. There is something freeing about all this?free to imagine, to improvise, to make things up, to wonder, to rage on. Sharpening wits on quick wit, his poetry runs free of restrictive ideas about Indians, poems, ponies, movies, shoes, dreams, dumpsters, reservations, angers, losses. His lines break free of precious art . . . but free for what, that matters? Do we care? the hard questions come tumbling. Do we remember, or listen closely, or think carefully, or wonder fully, or regard deeply enough?

Readers certainly learn about New Rez Indi’ns who shoot hoop, stroke pool, fancy dance, drink beer, snag girls, hustle, hitch, rap, joke, cry, rhyme, dream, write everything down. These Computer Rad ‘Skins write verse that does not stay contained in formal repose: does not pull away, or shimmer in the night sky, or intimidate the common reader, but comes on full as a poetry that begs visceral response. Often cartoonish, a gag, a point-of-view gimmick, more “like” Virtual Indian. "There is no possible way to sell your soul" for poetry, Alexie said in LA (December 17, 1996), "because nobody's offering. The devil doesn't care about poetry. No one wants to make a movie out of a poem." This trickster has made one movie, as mentioned, and cast another from Indian Killer.

Call it a reactive aesthetics, kinetic pop art, protest poetics to involve and challenge late-century readers?cajoled, battered, insulted, entertained, humored, angered to respond. A poetry that gets us up off our easy chairs. Tribal jive, that is, streetsmart, populist, ethnocentric, edged, opinionated, disturbed, fired up as reservation graffiti, a la John Trudell's Venice, California, rock lyrics, a Cherokee-breed Elvis as "Baby Boom Che." Alexie joins the brash, frontier bragadocio of westering America, already out west a long time, ironically, a tradition in itself, shared with Whitman, Lawrence, Stein, Mailer, Kesey, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Vonnegut, Bellow, Heinemann, Mamet. Huckster, con man, carny barker, stand-up comedian, Will Rogers to Jonathan Winters, Cheech & Chong to Charlie Hill. The impudence of the anti-poetic Red Rapster, daring us not to call this poetry. "I'm not a rapper," Russell Means crows of his punk album, Electric Warrior, "I'm a Rapaho!"

"You'll almost / believe every Indian is an Indian," Alexie carries on.

Frybread . . . Snakes . . . Forgiveness

Publication Status: Excerpted Criticism
Author: Kenneth Lincoln
Review Process: Single Review
Criticism Target: Sherman Alexie

Source URL: https://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/kenneth-lincoln-sherman-alexie

Links
[1] https://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism